



THE VERY CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE CONTACT IN LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY INTEREST IN TRANSLANGUAGING

O PRÓPRIO CONCEITO DE CONTATO LINGUÍSTICO À LUZ DO INTERESSE CONTEMPORÂNEO EM TRANSLANGUAGING

Kanavillil Rajagopalan¹

Resumo: Este trabalho tem por objetivo pleitear que o conceito de translanguagem desafia uma série de conceitos tradicionalmente consagrados como contato linguístico, código linguístico, *code-switching*, línguas discretas concebidas como objetos autocontidos e hermeticamente isolados um do outro etc.– enfim, toda a parafernália conceitual com a qual estamos acostumados a abordar o fenômeno de multilinguismo. Longe de ser uma exceção, multilinguismo é sabidamente o que há de mais comum no mundo, sendo o dito monolinguismo nada mais que produto de políticas repressivas praticadas em tempos passados em nome de interesses geopolíticos, dentre os quais, a criação e/ou a manutenção de estados-nações como baluarte de identidade coletiva e diferenciação em oposição aos desafetos, tachados de ‘forasteiros’ – um fenômeno de exceção imposto sobre a ordem natural das coisas. Ou seja, monolinguíssimo é um ponto totalmente fora da curva, um fato historicamente atestado, porém ofuscado pela ingerência por fatores de ordem geopolítica.

Palavras-chave: multilinguismo; contato linguístico; translanguagem.

Abstract: This paper makes a case for viewing the concept of translanguaging as one that puts a heavy strain on a good deal of the time-honoured concepts of language contact, language code, code-switching, discrete languages as self-contained entities, hermetically sealed off from one another, and so forth — that is to say, the entire conceptual paraphernalia with the help of which we are used to working when dealing with the phenomenon of multilingualism. Far from being an exception to a rule, multilingualism is recognised as the norm in today’s world, the much-touted monolingualism having been exposed as the product of repressive policies enacted in the past in the name of geopolitical expediencies. Among these repressive policies is the formation of nation-states, historically brandished as the bulwark of a collective identity and also of differentiation vis-à-vis those with whom one no longer feels any common bond — an exception foisted upon the natural order of things. In other words, monolingualism is a point totally out of the curve, a fact that is historically attested, though overshadowed by its ‘contamination’ with factors that have to do with deep-seated geo-political interests.

Keywords: multilingualism; language contact; translanguaging.

Only what is distinguished exists. Although it is distinct from ourselves, we are nevertheless tied to it through the operation of distinction. Whenever I distinguish something, the entity that is distinguished emerges together with some background in which the distinction makes sense, it brings forth the domain in which it exists (Maturana & Poerksen, 2011, p.32)

¹ Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp), Campinas, SP, Brasil. rajan@iel.unicamp.br

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3877-4936>

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SOME INITIAL MUSINGS ON THE IDEA OF ‘LANGUAGE CONTACT’ TO START OFF WITH

I know this may sound somewhat weird, but there is, to be sure, something embarrassingly odd about the term ‘language contact.’ It is, it seems to me, rather like the emperor’s new clothes. For starters, I cannot get over the feeling that the very idea of language contact should strike anyone in their right senses as smacking of putting the cart before the horse. Because the underlying suggestion whenever one comes up with the phrase ‘language contact’ or ‘languages in contact’ would appear to be that it is conceivable that a language can exist all on its own — independently of any other language in its vicinity, in splendid isolation from all others. And, even more importantly, having no truck with any of them. It seldom crosses our minds that this idea may well be the result of our unquestioning acceptance of a convenient myth that has been passed on to us through generations ever since our ancestors became comfortable with the idea of living in isolated and self-contained groups, having long given up the nomadic life styles of their forebears. Once we have reified language the way we long have and hardly ever paused to question it since then, it is easy to ignore the fact that the idea of language contact is nothing more than a manner of speaking about those occasions of human interaction that run into unfamiliar terrains, where the speakers do not quite recognise, as it were, the lay of the land! After all, people who are largely in agreement with one another over a number of issues are often heard patting themselves on the back, saying “Isn’t it great that you and I speak the same language!”. So too, it is not uncommon to hear someone saying, of their next-door neighbor whom they have long known and with whom they have long been on friendly terms, “So-and-so speaks another language” when all that has happened between the two of them who have long been friends is a minor tiff leading to a momentary standoff. These casual, off-the-cuff remarks often encapsulate precious folk wisdom that we would be ill-advised to brush aside.

My interest in language policy and language planning, or more broadly, language politics in general, makes me think that the whole story has been very badly told. In fact, it has been told backwards. What there was — or must have been, given that we do not have at our disposal a time warp that will propel us back into those days when *homo sapiens* evolved into *homo loquens* (assuming that is the right sequence of events) and must therefore bank on an impromptu *Gedankenexperiment* — in the beginning, there was just language plain and simple, with no further hemming or hawing, or what we have, over the ages, come to call by such a name. Mind you, language with no preceding article, be it definite or indefinite. The metalinguistic awareness of the very idea of *a* language could only have sprung up when, let us say, our ‘budding, Neanderthal linguist’ met for the first time in their life a hither-to unknown, distant cousin of theirs whose uncanny jabberings sounded total gibberish, i.e., made no sense whatsoever to their ears. It seems reasonable to conjecture that this must have been the moment when the possibility of there being different languages dawned upon the protagonist of our story. What a *eureka moment* it must have been! (see Rajagopalan, 2013: 146 for a slightly more nuanced account of this *Gedankenexperiment* with a different protagonist). That is to say, the notion of *a language* (i.e. one with a preceding indefinite article) must have been a latter day development; that snippet of metalinguistic awareness was consequently the outcome of contact with strangers, not the other way around! Hence the oddity of talking about ‘language contact.’

That said, it is worth pointing out that the idea of language contact may indeed have some *prima facie* appeal these days, especially in those extreme cases where people from different parts of the globe find themselves in contact with one another all of a

sudden (say, in colonial encounters of a not-so-distant past or other marauding expeditions to far-flung, alien lands or, for that matter, the still occurring mass movements of refugees across the continents) but, moving from these cases to generalise about peoples and their languages runs the risk of vastly overrating the case. The truth of the matter is that peoples from different corners of our terrestrial globe have always been in contact with one another, bumped into one another every now and then. In our wired world, this phenomenon has become even more pronounced than ever before. As irony would have it, it is this contact that creates the right conditions (and urgency) for asserting, or rather, literally inventing, the supposed ‘uniqueness’ of different peoples, their nations, their cultures and what have you. These identities were created out of the sheer need (driven by notably political motives) to separate one group of people from another by ‘othering’ the latter at any cost, and simultaneously providing those in the ‘in-group’ with a rallying cry, laying the groundwork for the emergence of an ‘us-versus-them’ mentality. Among these rallying cries or, to use another metaphor, flags of allegiance (cf. Rajagopalan, 2001), was the notion of *a* language (yes, this time, by all means, language with a preceding indefinite article). Needless to point out, such a claim would chime with the celebrated thesis put forward by Robin Dunbar (1996), famous British anthropologist, to the effect that it was the sense of camaraderie fostered by a ‘you scratch my back, I scratch yours’ kind of team spirit that must have led to the very emergence of language.

As just noted, the spectacle of migrants from war-ravaged countries flitting from one country to another desperately seeking asylum at any cost that floods out TV screens these days may also promote and give a new life to the idea of disparate languages being thrown out of the blue into close contact with one another. But, once again, it is important to bear in mind that in our internet age, as noted earlier, where information travels in seconds, no two languages are ever as alien to each other as they may have sounded in the times gone by. At the very least, there is a clear need to redefine the notion of language contact, along with the entire gamut of assorted concepts, in light of our ever shrinking world of lived reality (more on this, later). In other words, what I am suggesting is that the field of study known as ‘contact linguistics’ stands in urgent need of a thorough reexamination of its foundational premises, despite (or, precisely in virtue of) the fact that many inadvertently fall for it as they do in the case of the emperor’s brand-new clothes!

Recent trends in research (cf. Duranti, Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012) involving crucial terms such as ‘language socialisation’ and ‘enculturation’ bear witness to changing scholarly mindsets over the role of language and social actors. In particular, refreshingly original claims like the following show how there has been a sea change from the old deterministic, unidirectional view of socialisation as taking place in the passage from isolated to socially inscribed individuals to a more erratic, multidimensional process of coalescence:

In line with the notion that individuals comprise multiple selves as they move through life experiences [...], language socialization research holds that habitus is infused with fluidity across the life cycle as well as across generations. It has been widely noted that institutional experiences, most notably those transpiring in schools, draw children into transformative dispositions and practices [...]. *What is less noticed is that children and youths actively assume informal, age-appropriate, situated practical communicative competences and subjectivities that they shed and that may ‘atrophy’ from disuse later in life.* (italics added) (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012: 5)

Also germane to the issue at hand is the thorny and awkward topic of ‘mixed languages.’ As a concept it has always been slippery (not to mention, infused with unconcealed, abominable racist connotations) forcing scholars like Matras (2000, p. 79) to concede that any putative difference between ‘mixed’ (by implication, marked) and

‘pure’ (again, by implication, unmarked) languages may be quantitative rather than qualitative – thereby ill-suited to serving as a technical or descriptively adequate term. Moreover, there is also the inconvenient fact that the term ‘mixed language’ would only make any sense at all when juxtaposed with and is used in contrast to ‘pure language’ — that’s to say, no matter how hard you may pretend otherwise, the idea of language purity always looms large on any discussion over the idea of ‘mixed language’. Here is Matras (2000, p. 79) in his own words:

Most languages are, to some extent at least, “mixed”, in the sense that they have components that can be traced back to more than one source language as a result of a situation of contact in the language’s earlier history. So when languages are referred to in literature as explicitly “mixed” [...] it is presumably in order to highlight that they go beyond the commonly attested patterns of mixture. Mixed languages are thus understood implicitly as least to breach conventional constraints on contact-induced language change.

So, here we go again! The sub-text that refuses to go silent here is: language mixture is an unfortunate lapse from the ‘normal’ order of things. It is prompted by the “result of a situation of contact in the language’s earlier history” – another ‘mishap’ that befell that language! One cannot help feeling that the snowball tentatively set in motion by Einar Haugen in his classic 1950 paper, with its totally unassuming title ‘The analysis of linguistic borrowing,’ has rolled all the way along downhill to land us in this conceptual quagmire, having by now hopelessly overgrown in size and now threatening to crush us all!

As early as 1886, Herman Paul pointed out that all borrowing by one language from another is predicated on some minimal bilingual mastery of the two languages. [...] Perhaps the most widely understood term for the phenomena we are here considering is based on the metaphor of ‘mixing’. (Haugen, 1950, p. 210)

Even when scholars come out and decry possible negative associations attached to the term ‘mixed language’, the idea that individual languages do exist as such with their discrete identities never under threat makes its presence felt in the form of an unchallenged subtext. Witness, for instance, the following excerpt from the opening chapter of Donald Winford’s 2003 book entitled *An Introduction to Contact Linguistics*:

In offering his account of Caló, the mixture of Spanish and Romani used as an in-group language by Roma (gypsies) in Spain, Rosenberg [...] referred to it, in the very title of his book, as “Gutter Spanish.” A flyer from the West Sussex bookseller advertising publications on “dialect and folk speech, pidgins and creoles,” describes these forms of language, in boldface capitals, as “vulgar and debased English.” Language mixture has always prompted strong emotional reaction, often in the form of ridicule, passionate condemnation or outright rejection. (Winford, 2003, p. 1)

The idea of language (in the singular) as a unified whole, fully self-sufficient and independent of all others contiguous with it, is a veritable chimera that has run loose in the imagination of both the lay persons and the professional linguists. But, when pressed to define a given language, they often find themselves either changing the subject or invoking criteria that are anything but linguistic. It is rather like thinking of language or speech as the property or attribute of man in the singular. That singleton representative of homo sapiens needs no outside help whatsoever to hone their linguistic skills; those skills are destined, so the story goes, to blossom all on their own. That is how our much-celebrated ‘innateness hypothesis’ unfolds! If other sentient beings happen to come into contact with our protagonist, well that is a matter of pure happenstance, totally off the script! Chomsky (1975, p. 75) has gone on record as saying that “as for the fact that the

rules of language are ‘public rules,’ this is, indeed, a contingent fact.” As I noted in a comment I once made on that remark (Rajagopalan, 2006, p. 434 – 435): “Society is viewed as nothing but the backdrop against which the individual is to be singled out and focused on.” In other words, society is invoked, at best, as an after-thought. Once again, I would dare to submit, a language speaker of this sort, though the hotly pursued specimen of many, maybe even most, theories about language, does not qualify as anything more than a mare’s nest — its very unique nature, dispensing with all and any social contact, makes it as an aberrant being, far removed from anything we come across in the world of empirical reality (leaving aside those bizarre reports about lone wolf boys and other feral humans, intruding into our lives as well as after-dinner conversations every once in a blue moon!).

By focusing on the lone speaking individual, we miss the interacting, socially immersed subject — the one that, when all is said and done, should be at the epicentre of our enquiry to begin with, especially when we are interested in conceiving of language as a social practice, which is what serves as the backdrop for all those phenomena we wish to refer to as language contact, code-switching etc. This idea was captured tersely by Hymes in a classic paper entitled ‘Speech and language: on the origins and foundations of inequality among speakers’ (1973, p. 60) when he pondered: “A perspective which treats language as an attribute of man leaves language as an attribute of men unintelligible.” Anyone who thinks otherwise is wedded to the thoroughly untenable position that talk is no more than a mere sum total of individual mutterings – or that, a wood is the totality of trees and nothing else besides (whereof the idiomatic expression, ‘miss the wood for the trees’). As we shall see in the concluding part of this paper, this gross error of missing the wood, or if you like, ignoring the bigger picture is far more common in our philosophical thinking about language and, to be sure, has to do with over-attention to detail for fear that any distraction may only obfuscate matters beyond repair.

As a matter of fact, the implicit, unstated assumption whenever one brings up the topic of language contact would seem to be that there was a time — say, in the long-bygone halcyon days of linguistic primal glory — when individual, discretely delimited languages existed as such in the real world in their pristine purity! Hermetically closed unto themselves and rendered proof against outside influences! Well, nothing could be further from the truth. The more and the deeper we delve into the moth-eaten annals of history, the more we are greeted by the surprising finding that the idea of these putatively individual languages existing isolatedly from one another is nothing but the figment of our imagination that probably began to take shape with such politically-charged notions as those of the nation-state, people (*Volk*), national identity and national symbols such as flag, national anthem, coat of arms etc. – all products, notably, of the 19th century. Note that, as many scholars have argued, the 19th century stands out as the period that not only saw the carving up of all these discrete identities afresh but also helped redefine and refurbish many ancient ones by sprucing them up, trimming their rough edges.

However, as I pointed out in a paper written a decade or so ago:

But there is a profound irony in all this. History has proved time and time again that no language, no nation, can thrive on its own in blissful isolation from the rest. Rather, endogeny spells disaster for societies as well as their languages. Both languish and wither away, unless they receive a fresh ‘fillip’ from the outside every once in a while. That is to say, the vitality of a living language is only guaranteed by inter-animation with other languages. (Rajagopalan, 2011, p. 60)

Setting that important caveat aside for the time being, if we concede that, in more senses than one, the 19th century laid the groundwork for our current thinking on many matters of everyday concern, including the language issue, it is but a small step to realise

how easy it is to fall into trap of thinking that (a) languages exist in splendid isolation, each with its own unique, discrete identity and (b) monolingualism is the norm right across the world. We miss the truth by a mile on both propositions. Sadly, both these ideas have been openly embraced or implicitly held by practising linguists over generations, a fact that led acute observers of the field like Chris Hutton (1996) to exclaim that modern Linguistics is probably the most ‘19th century’ of the disciplines currently taught in our universities.

Now, it is worth reminding ourselves every now and then that, long before named languages came into being, people gladly went about their routine business of communicating, confabulating with one another, of bonding together, unmindful of whether or not they were speaking one and the same language or actually resorting to a pot-pourri of different languages, along with a host of other semiotic accoutrements. They were all too busy concentrating on the transactional side of the communication to worry about the precise nature and constitution of the means of communication they were putting to use.

Things get even murkier as we pan further back in time. Before stable social bonds began to be formed leading to settled life patterns and the establishment of rules for organised social behaviour, humans were content to live out their nomadic lives and mingling with new faces all the time and making new friends in the process. And this meant that the not-infrequent contact with total strangers was the norm, not the exception. With boundary lines marking off nation-states from one another yet to be drawn and as-of-yet mostly unheard of, people had no idea of what it meant to be a foreigner as someone different from a fellow-citizen. This is attested to by the fact that the modern Greek word *xenos* (ξένος) is still ambiguous between the meanings of ‘stranger’ and ‘foreigner,’ a legacy from its roots in ancient Greek where the semantic slippery slope was just what was to be expected, thanks to there being no national boundaries that would warrant any justification of discriminating between the two poles.

All this experienced a seismic shift as people discovered the benefits of agriculture, in particular arable farming and animal husbandry. This led to these people settling down for good in their chosen piece of land and calling it their home. As more people followed suit, their numbers kept swelling. This, in turn, was how the idea of community living—in direct answer to their gregarious instinct—sprang up to begin with. With the formation of relatively small clusters that eventually grew to constitute larger societies, patterns of communication as well as dictates and usages thereof became more and more predictable. As a result, it soon became possible for someone to be able to tell a given society from another, thanks to the distinctive features of its communicative practices that helped set it apart from all others. This historical timeline, confessedly speculative but well-nigh plausible all the same for want of a better alternative, does leave us with an important moral with consequential implications.

That moral may be summed up in one pithy sentence, rolled out earlier on in this paper: the story of language contact has been very badly told from the start. If anything, the sequence of events is just the other way around. What there was, to begin with, was contact. That is to say, contact among humans who needed to bond together in order to, say, face down common enemies or set out, say, on a hunting expedition. Mind you, our story is taking place at a time when there was not yet anything resembling what one would today call a *named language*. Many of us might have some initial difficulty imagining a time period when named languages didn’t even exist as such. In fact, so-called ‘named languages’ do not have their existence in the real world. The very qualifier ‘named’ attests to that. These languages only exist to the extent they are named. The very act of naming brings them to life, as it were! As Shakespeare would say, repurposing his own words,

that act of naming brings the languages in question to life, by giving them “a local habitation and a name.” As for the thousands of unnamed languages, their ‘emancipation,’ as and when—and if at all—it happens, will be at the hands of politicians and the like, not linguists, to be sure!

But to get back to our story, the so-called ‘named’ languages—i.e. languages considered individually, each with its discrete identity and clearly demarcated boundaries only began to pop up, after men and women had long been confabulating among one another — and, you may rest assured that they were not in the least bit bothered about such latter-day rallying cries as language loyalty etc. if only for the reason that they had no metalinguistic awareness of there being such mystical entities as languages, to begin with! The very ‘emergence’ of these individual languages had more to do with political, geographic, historical, sociological, psychological, ethnic and a host of factors other than what one would consider strictly linguistic or communicational. As I put it in a paper I wrote some two decades ago (Rajagopalan, 2001, p. 17), “Linguistic identity is largely a political matter and languages are flags of allegiance” and, further, that “there are no such things as languages, if by ‘languages’ we mean natural objects that are ‘out there,’ waiting to be discovered, described and catalogued by the linguist.” If I may put it even more starkly, languages are not linguistic entities in their making or provenance, properly speaking. The fact that they lend themselves, with the passage of time, to rigorous analyses with the help of concepts and categories from the linguists’ tool kit does not undermine that inconvenient truth, nor help push it to the backburner it as one might hope.

The idea of language ecology, first mooted by Haugen (1972) half a century ago brings a breath of fresh air into this discussion. As Haugen admitted in his book, the notion is suffused with psychological and sociological connotations and, as Blackledge (2008, p. 182) writes:

Relationships between languages and their speakers, and languages and societal structures, are subject to their social, political and historical contexts. Language ecologies include the discourse which constructs values and beliefs about languages at state, institutional, national and global levels. That is, ecologies of languages may be better understood when complemented with discussion of ideologies of language.

The last point raised by Blackledge underscores the fact that linguists wishing to grapple with language ecology have to reckon with the hot-button issue of language ideology, in addition to psychological and sociological ones that already make the phenomenon a lot more intractable. Just how easy it is for things to get out of hand is alluded to by Baxter (2018) when, in his discussion of what is referred to as ‘a continuum of varieties of Portuguese in colonial settings’ of Africa and Brazil, he mentions “linguistic (yet also extra-linguistic qualities deriving from their specific ecologies.”

GETTING THINGS STRAIGHT

Before we move on, let us briefly sum up the main takeaway from the discussion thus far. Language contact is not something that happens out of the blue to an individual language in splendid isolation from other languages. If anything, it is the very idea that there are such things as individual languages, supposedly identifiable on purely linguistic grounds (a pointless exercise in sterile wool-gathering!), that is highly questionable. No matter how hard one tries, one is soon led to the sad conclusion that languages in their individuating sense can only be defined by invoking criteria that are, when all is said and done, quintessentially geo-political – as when one is forced to mention Oiyapoque and

Chui or other geographical coordinates in order to delimit the Portuguese language in its Brazilian variety or refer to its colonial past when attempting to carve out a Lusophone world.

I shall not dwell on this point much longer for the simple reason that it will only divert us from our principal focus. But it seems vital to insist that part of the dilemma we are confronted with here is that we have traditionally not bothered to define what constitutes a single, *named language* – what makes English English, and not, say, French. Or when French ceases to be French and becomes German or a Franco-German hybrid language. As Vogel and García (2017, p. 5) note:

Translanguaging theory, in relying on a conceptualization of bilingualism as dynamic, argues that there are not two interdependent systems that bilinguals shuttle between, but rather one semiotic system integrating various lexical, morphological and grammatical linguistic features in addition to social practices and features individuals “embody (e.g. their gestures, their postures), as well as those outside of themselves which through use become part of their bodily memory (e.g. computer technology).

adding a little later

How scholars view the notion of translanguaging depends on whether or not they believe that named languages have linguistic reality and specific grammars. Those who adhere to the linguistic reality of named languages defend the notion of code-switching.

But, as it happens, code-switching presupposes the existence of two separate, independent grammars, two autonomous language systems. So, to speak of translanguaging, and in the same breath, speak of code-switching as well is to have one’s cake and eat it too. That is one reason why Makoni and Pennycook (2007) argue that, in the end, the prefix *trans-* in translanguaging may be redundant and entirely dispensable. On her part, García would rather have the term ‘translanguaging’ untouched and kept the way it is, as evidenced in the not-so-compelling excuse based on a comment by Walter Mignolo (2000, p. 229) to the effect that speakers “cannot avoid ‘being born’ in one or two language(s), to have them inscribed in your body.” (cf. Vogel & Gracia, 2017). While conceding that custom does force this or that language on the speaker, much like the moniker they are required to carry from the day their birth certificates were issued, I fail to see why that should stand in the way of ditching ‘translanguaging’ in favour of ‘languaging’ pure and simple.

In what follows, we will let matters rest at that and proceed to a discussion of how the phenomenon of translanguaging — a relatively new addition to the working linguists’ conceptual tool-kit — not only draws attention to the utter impossibility of continuing to maintain the illusion of languages flourishing in self-imposed isolation from one another, but also brings to the fore the need to allow for the constant trespassing, indeed crisscrossing back and forth, of their putative boundaries. Or, if you like, raising the prospect of linguistic no man’s land! Indeed, what comes under renewed scrutiny is nothing short of the very idea of language existing as an object, waiting ‘out there’ in the world and ready for the linguist’s prying eyes to feast upon and conjure up grandiose theories about. As we come to terms with the potentially subversive idea of (trans)languaging, we may see this as making a mockery of an entire stockpile of concepts that form the linguist’s armoury, among which the idea of ‘language contact’ the way it has traditionally been conceptualised — as a phenomenon out of the ordinary rather than being of the very essence of what language is all about.

TRANSLANGUAGING AS THE *DERNIER CRI* IN CONTEMPORARY LINGUISTICS

The term ‘translanguaging’ is a relative newcomer and has only been a part of the linguist’s tool-kit, say, in the last three or four decades. Even today, many scholars still resist it for a variety of reasons. But the idea itself of languages with porous and ill-defined borders has long been around. From a historical point of view, there is ample evidence to show that that is how the linguistic map of the continents has invariably looked like, the emergence of modern states and the subsequent enactment of language policies designed to prop them up through artificial means being the one factor that helped camouflage the volatile language situation on the ground below. As Wright (2003, p. 3) put it: “A language exists ultimately because a community wills it, and the relation between ‘naturally evolving system’ and ‘designed system’ is a constant one.” Wright, I believe, was being cautiously diplomatic in so phrasing it, because I believe that, when it comes to the nuts and bolts of it, the actual situation is a lot murky and way more obscure.

One way to characterise the phenomenon of translanguaging is to point to the undeniable fact that language is always an object in the making and cannot help being so (with due exception made for so-called ‘dead languages’ – bare skeletons of languages that have long ceased to exist!). Bucking a common trend among researchers working on the topic, I prefer to trace the term to the early work of the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana who coined the term *linguaging* in the 1960s (more on this, towards the end of this paper). The gerundival novelty was introduced to emphasise the perennially unfinished nature of language, constantly being moulded to suit the demands and the needs of its speakers and being influenced by and, in turn, influencing other ‘neighbouring’ languages. The transition from *linguaging* to *translanguaging* is, it seems to me, not to be lost sight of for the reason that it keeps intact the one distinguishing feature of the phenomenon under examination: the state of perennial flux. What is new here is that what is being talked about is a multiplicity of languages (a hangover from centuries of usage) instead of a supposedly singleton language.

But a note of caution is in order. In both cases, one should not be taken in by the ‘singularity - vs. – plurality’ dimension, nor read too much meaning into it. This is so because the whole idea of ‘one versus many’ is not germane to the issue at hand, if only for the reason that the identity of the object(s) is being viewed as unstable, fluid and dynamic. So it hardly matters whether it is a set of different languages or one and the same language. If we still have difficulty grappling with this crucial point, it is because we are so used to thinking of language as endowed with discrete identities. In other words, it makes a tremendous lot of difference if we parse the term ‘translanguaging’ as ‘(trans- + language) + ing’ or ‘trans- + languaging.’ In the first case, ‘language’ is right at the etymological root of the composite term, whereas, in the latter, its place is taken up by the neologism ‘languaging.’

That said, it must be conceded that translanguaging was first noticed in what were widely regarded as multilingual contexts where it is recognised by wide consensus that more than one distinct language is in use. Once again, there is a crucial rider to the generalisation just enunciated. Translanguaging is much more commonly attested in communities that are *societally* multilingual. Societal multilingualism stands out from other situations where two or more languages are spoken in a society, where sectors or sub-communities within the society mingle very little if at all amongst themselves. The preponderance of ghettos prevents otherwise multilingual societies from becoming *societally* multilingual, by limiting inter-group interactions to a bare minimum, if at all. Also, another key feature of societal multilingualism is that one and the same person feels

the need to switch between (what would otherwise be regarded) as different languages. Furthermore, this constant toing and froing among what are deemed different languages is an integral part of social life and, more often than not, goes unnoticed. These ‘different languages’ form a complex whole, an elaborate linguistic repertoire. There are fairly strict rules for this habitual practice of ‘changing horses in the mid-stream,’ with socially imposed strictures for failures to comply. I shall illustrate this complex linguistic ball game, by referring to a social set-up I am familiar with, having played an active part in it for a good part of my life as a young adult.

New Delhi, the capital of India, is by all linguistic accounts, a city where societal multilingualism is the norm and is rampant – the most common named languages being Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and English, although many regional vernaculars such as Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam, Gujarati, Marathi and so on also mark their presence in the language mix occasionally (In this respect, it resembles any other major, metropolitan city in the country, indeed many other Asian cities and some cities elsewhere in the world, which are melting pots of people originally from different linguistic milieux). The result is a linguistic pot-pourri which leaves the outsiders at their wit’s end. To make matters even more complex, the English that is being referred to here bears only a remote resemblance to its standard version spoken internationally. Called Hinglish, this curious admixture of Hindi and English has been described as a ‘language surrogate’ spoken on a regular basis by around 350 million people in India alone. (Crystal, 2004; Baldauf, 2004; Rahman, 2015) – according to Chand (2016), exceeding by far the number of people capable of speaking its internationally recognised standard variety. To make matters even more complicated, the number of people who speak English in India is anybody’s guess. This is how David Graddol (2010, p. 66) describes the issue:

English has been spoken in India from colonial days, but there is no credible estimate of how many Indians actually know English. For many years, estimates have hovered around 5% of the population, which at the start of the twentieth century suggests 10 million and in 2010 around 55 million.

But he goes on to add a little later:

As with most things, English proficiency in India is distributed unevenly across the various socio-economic groups. The reality is that English plays some role in the lives of all Indians, even those who say they cannot speak or read it.

and further,

No one really knows how many Indians speak English today – estimates vary between 55 million and 350 million – between 1% of the population and a third.

We may, for the time being, leave aside Graddol’s concern that “the challenge lies in agreeing on what level constitutes being able to ‘speak’ the language”. This may be particularly relevant to the concerns of a language teacher or a census enumerator, but has no direct bearing on what concerns us here – namely that, after seven decades of independence from British rule, English still plays a vital role in the lives of millions and millions of people in India and is part and parcel of the language mix or, *pot pourri* as I called it earlier, that is the popular medium of communication among sizeable portions of India’s population. This is not to sideline recognizing the fact that estimating language proficiency is a hard nut to crack for a number of reasons, not the least significant of which is the issue raised by Graddol of just what one means by the term ‘language proficiency.’ That difficulty is rendered even more intractable when one is concerned

with the knowledge of English among the people at large in a multilingual country like India, where, no doubt, English is, by all means, a major component of the overall linguistic repertoire at the disposal of the speakers – but, at the same time, it is also a language with a heavy colonial baggage attached to it – a veritable albatross around the necks of many in the former colony.

In a talk given to Australia Broadcasting Corporation in 2005, Crystal (2005, p. 1) remarked:

In 1997, an *India Today* survey suggested that about a third of the population had the ability to carry on a conversation in English. This is an amazing increase on the estimates of 1980, when only about four or five percent of the population were thought to use the language. And given the steady increase in learning since 1997 in schools and among upwardly mobile, we must today be talking about at least 350 million. That is equal to the combined English-speaking populations of Britain, the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

But then we must not lose sight of the fact that English is a part of a language mix. One would be hard put to come across an Indian living in India who speaks only English, from dawn to dusk. The most telling recent example of how English is inextricably woven into the speech habits of ordinary people in India that the present writer can think of comes from the episode of the cross-examination by the Mumbai police of one of the handful of surviving members of the Pakistan-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba immediately after the 2008 surprise attack on Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai and the shoot-out that ensued. Under heavy grilling, one of the terrorists spluttered: “*Māe koyee terrorist nahim hoom; māe freedom-fighter hum.*” (I am no terrorist; I am a freedom-fighter.) (cited from memory from extensive press coverage while the aftermath of the gory saga was playing out). What makes this utterance particularly interesting is that the speaker, evidently under great stress, had been identified as a semi-literate up-country job who did what he did presumably at the behest of some terrorist mastermind under the radar.

An important aspect of such translanguaging practices is that these cases of deliberately ‘changing horses in mid-stream’ are done with a purpose (although at a sub- or semi-conscious level) and, contrary to what that idiomatic expression is generally used to convey, serve to project a more respectable mien of the speaker in question. Thus, in the case we have just looked at, the suspect under police custody is resorting to the use of two English expressions with a clear purpose. He is indirectly conveying to the police officers that he is well-schooled to know his rights under the international law and that he is not an uncouth criminal that he may be made out to be. Furthermore, by using the word *freedom-fighter*, he is invoking for himself an old badge of honour that harks back to the country’s colonial history which he hopes his Indian captors would readily recognise. During the days of the country’s (i.e., when India and Pakistan were one single country) struggle for independence, the expression was used as a compliment, proudly flaunted as a feather in their cap by those who had anything to do with it and even time spent behind bars as a political prisoner was deemed a valuable plus point.

What specific instances of translanguaging such as the one presented in the foregoing paragraph go to prove is that translanguaging is not a mere blending of languages in one single utterance. Nor is the decision to opt for a different language half way through a sentence already started off in another language a matter of simple whim. It is suffused with meanings of all sorts, which the speaker prefers to convey in subtle, indirect ways for a variety of reasons. In other words, rather than simply consider translanguaging as a haphazard pot pourri of languages, it is much more revealing to look upon the phenomenon as making up a complex and intricate semiotic repertoire (and the

adroit use thereof) that a group of language-users from heterogeneous linguistic backgrounds employ as they socialise with one another. It is, furthermore, a fully integrated repertoire, “rule-governed” in its own unique way, where every detail is there for a reason. Canagarajah’s characterisation of translanguaging as ‘code-meshing’ which he goes on to describe as “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system” (2011, p. 40) captures this idea, although it must be pointed out that the very mention of the term ‘code’ is regrettable for being steeped in the vocabulary of languages as self-contained wholes and the metaphor of shuttling reinforces the idea of the fixity of locations and legitimacy of borders separating clearly demarcated spaces.

SOCIETAL MULTILINGUALISM AND WHY IT ACTS AS A BREEDING GROUND (OR A STAGING POST, OR, WHO KNOWS, A SPRINGBOARD?) FOR TRANSLANGUAGING

It should by now be fairly obvious that translanguaging happens when people of different linguistic and cultural traditions find themselves having to share a common social milieu under more or less stable conditions. The different languages and cultures that are brought together in the process do retain their original identities and badges of loyalty to the best of their speakers’ abilities and desires, but are nevertheless forced to make concessions to the other languages and cultures that they need to live with – or, rather, are “destined” to do so. The result is a kaleidoscope or a patchwork of great complexity, with the component languages beginning to take on the role vaguely reminiscent of different registers in what is reputed to be one and the same language. Going back to our case study of the city of New Delhi, one may get a better idea of how societal multilingualism works in real life by referring to a joke popular among the city’s inhabitants (Delhiites, to use the local demonym) that runs along the following lines: “In Delhi, if you want to present yourself as a *pukka desi* (100% local), you speak ‘chaste’ Hindi; speak English if you wish to go up the social scale; you would be well-advised to brush up your Urdu, if you wish to get a date; you’d better have some Punjabi up your sleeve if you want to drive on the city’s crowded streets (with their proverbially chaotic traffic).” Jocosity aside, remarks like this only highlight the differential social and emotional valuations and images attached to the component languages in the societally multilingual mix, specifically under scrutiny. As Ofelia García, a leading researcher on multilingualism and translanguaging eloquently put it several decades back:

[...] beyond the practical communicative function of language lies its symbolic and metaphorical function. It is this latter function of language that allows us to unearth new meanings, expand images and connect with our self-identity. Multilingualism brings closer the explosion of the galaxy of signifiers and signifieds which liberates men from their pedestrian existence. (García, 1992, p. 6)

I would hasten to add that, not only do they lift us out of our otherwise ‘pedestrian existence,’ but also they help cement and seal existing communal bonds, warding off any fissiparous tendencies lurking beneath the surface. As for the practice of weaving their way in and out of a multiplicity of what are recognised as named languages, alongside multimodal semiotic resources, translanguaging speakers put on full display strategies of selecting features (cf. García and Li, 2014, p. 22) – a phenomenon that is beyond our grasp when approached with the traditional tool-kit we as linguists are used to working with.

Another prized concept in discussions about language, be it amongst lay persons or professional linguists, is that of the native speaker of a given language. It has survived repeated hammerings. Despite being long considered far too slippery to be useful as a descriptive term, its demise is yet to be officially recognised (leaving aside the publication of such semi-jocose and eye-catching titles as Pikeaday's (1985) *The Native Speaker is Dead!*). As Calvet (2006) puts it:

The notion of 'mother tongue' is thus a mixture of myth and ideology. The family is not necessarily the place where languages are transmitted, and sometimes we observe breaks in transmission, often translated by a change of language, with children acquiring as first language the one that dominates in the milieu. This phenomenon...concerns all multilingual situations and most of the situations of migration.

People born and raised in supposedly monolingual settings (i.e. cases of the abstraction one might call 'societal monolingualism,' more often than not, a product of brutal language policies enacted in the past in order to suppress minority groups and their languages and cultural heritage), often have difficulty in making sense of what it is to live in a city or town which is *societally* multilingual. Many even think of having to deal with more than one language in one's day-to-day life an enormous burden to carry and impediment to the smooth flow of communication. But to those brought up in a societally multilingual setup, it is an altogether different story. They are so used to bumping into people of other ethnic and linguistic backgrounds that switching between languages is almost automatic and done as a matter of habit. And what is more important is that in these so-called multilingual encounters, it is hardly ever the case that the participants share command of the languages involved in an equal measure. Some maybe quite conversant in the language that is elected over the others on a specific occasion, while others may have at their disposal only a smattering of it. The best way to describe their impromptu 'communicative performance' is that the actors involved make do with whatever they are able to get their hands on. In the process, they even literally *invent* ways of speaking and new turns of expression. In fact, it may be no exaggeration to venture the hypothesis that these occasions (which are all too common in societally multilingual settings) provide ideal conditions for the rise of nonce turns of phrase and usages, clear signs of language change through translanguaging practices.

TRANSLANGUAGING AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The concept of translanguaging has been embraced by a growing number of linguists since it was first mooted less than half a century ago. But even as the number of new adherents keeps growing by the day, so too has the list of its critics and sceptics. Many are simply alarmed by what they see as the term's overreach at the hands of enthusiastic new converts. Jaspers (2017, p. 3) gives vent to some of these concerns in the following words:

In sum, translanguaging can apply to an innate instinct that includes monolinguals; to the performance of fluid language use that pertains to mostly bilinguals; to a bilingual pedagogy; to a theory or approach to language; to a process or personal or social transformation. By any standards, this is a lot for one term.

Jaspers is saying that the term is too generic to be of any use as a theoretical term. In their turn, Edwards (2012) and Grin (2018) have taken their grievances a notch further by calling into question the very usefulness of the term 'translanguaging,' which they would

rather see extirpated from the glossary once and for all. Many of these scholars are of the opinion that what the advocates of translanguaging hope to achieve can just as well be handled by some form of ‘dynamic systems theory’ of the type mathematicians have been developing over the past few decades.

Many of these critical voices may seem to be advising caution against taking large steps in our overenthusiasm at magic cures to long-diagnosed maladies – by all means, a sensible and level-headed attitude to take. But there can be no doubt that they are also appalled by what they see as a threat of being swept aside in a whirlwind of conceptual and terminological reform and anarchy – such as the one signalled by such calculatedly earth-shattering claims as that “*languages, conceptions of languageness* and the conceptions of *metalanguages* used to describe them are inventions.” (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007, p. 1) (italics from the original).

The desperate plea for giving a chance to dynamic system theory must be seen as a last-ditch effort by old-timers to save what they can of the idea of languages being self-contained wholes (with their famous Saussurean *clôture* intact!) – with some room for dynamism incorporated into it as a frill. But this also bespeaks an obdurate refusal to come to terms with why translanguaging must be viewed as way out of a systemic failure to take a first-hand look at translanguaging practices on the ground below, instead of taking fleeting snapshots of them, while perched on the clouds of time-honoured theories. In the eloquent words of Otheguy, García and Reid (2015, p. 283),

[...] a full understanding of what is meant by translanguaging and an accurate take on what is meant by ‘a language’ allows us to graduate from the goal of ‘language maintenance,’ with its constant risk of turning minoritized languages into museum pieces, to that of sustainable practices by bilingual speakers that thrive in spatial and functional interrelation with the sustaining linguistic practices of other speakers [...]. Translanguaging [...] provides a smoother conceptual path than previous approaches to the goal of minoritized communities, their languages, their learners and schools.

What Otheguy et al. are driving home is that ‘translanguaging’ is not a fancy term — and one which is, in the eyes of its critics, a misnomer, too — for a long-familiar and much-examined phenomenon. Rather, it captures a dimension of the phenomenon that our stock-in-trade approaches seem ill-equipped to handle: namely, its practical and political implications. In many circumstances, minoritised speakers of low-prestige languages or dialects of what are claimed to be one and the same language (for no reason other than purely political ones) opt to translanguage with total abandon, but with well-calculated and thought-out design. But, as already noted, these translanguaging practices are in many ways rule-governed and not haphazard, a fact that becomes clearer when we consider the bigger picture of political undercurrents that provides the requisite illuminating background. An observation I made in a slightly different context a decade or so ago may be deemed pertinent here (Rajagopalan, 2012, p. 212):

In Indian English [...], there are social strictures for the use of the language on occasions where the use of a local vernacular would be more appropriate. “You’re showing *bhav*, no?” (You are acting pricey, aren’t you?) used to be the common rebuke one invariably got from one’s friends when I was a college student some three and half decades ago. This may partly explain the rise of ‘Hinglish’ among people of younger generations in the country today.

TRANSLANGUAGING: WHY IT TURNS THE TIME-HONOURED CONCEPTION OF LANGUAGE CONTACT ON ITS HEAD

Translanguaging (or, simply, languaging) is a theory-laden term. That much is for sure. It espouses a conception of language, not as a finished product fit for use by all and sundry (be they regular speakers or learners), but as something which is constantly being crafted and fine-tuned, indeed oftentimes tinkered with, even as its users go about using it. In other words, the whole idea flies in the face of the traditional wisdom that sees language as a medium of communication which is vital insofar as it provides a conduit (cf. Reddy, 1979) for the smooth flow of ideas, but in no way whatsoever affects whatever passes through it – an idea that is invoked every time many introductory textbooks on linguistics speak of language as a tool.

When taken seriously, that's to say, when understood with the full revolutionary impetus with which Maturana originally advanced the idea, the concept of translanguaging calls for a thorough revision, a radical overhaul, of the terminological armoury with the help of which many questions about language and how it works in real life were asked and answered. Thus, when viewed through the lens of translanguaging, many of our taken-for-granted concepts, to wit, L1, native language, mother-tongue, language contact, code-switching and so forth, reveal themselves to be completely outmoded and hence unserviceable. Only force of habit will help justify their continued use. But sloppy and slapdash use of these terms is liable to confound matters when what is being discussed is translanguaging and its far-reaching implications.

A case in point is the title of a paper that says “Translanguaging as a tool to preserve L1 languages and promote multilingualism” ([McCracken, 2017](#)). Nevertheless, I would hasten to note that the point of referring to this title and highlighting a fundamental incongruity in it is not to berate the author nor dismiss the very research project she bases her work on, but to issue a cautionary note that this a trap we all run the constant risk of walking into. Besides, in no way does it pose any danger to her sincere and, by all means, legitimate call to ensure the survival of endangered indigenous languages right across the world – a call that can still be answered and made to square with the promotion of translanguaging practices, albeit in ingeniously transfigured forms. After all, contrary to popular perception, languages do not simply disappear or fade away overnight or drop dead all of a sudden with no further ado or prior warning; instead they evolve and get new leases of ‘life’ by transforming, often in unrecognisable ways. This is just what happened to Latin in its passage to Romance languages via Vulgar Latin. Speakers pass away and disappear; languages don't. Instead, they transform, transfigure and transmute. (Trans)languaging moves ahead indefatigably under its own steam.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our discussion in the foregoing paragraphs has been admittedly somewhat meandering. Perhaps a most befitting manner in which to round off our thoughts would be to begin by citing the following words by a linguist whose brilliant, innovative and original thinking I have always admired and held in high esteem:

If there is anything about language that seems obvious, both to ordinary people and to many linguistic scientists, it is that there are such things as languages, distinct from one another, each one shared by multiple people. It is also widely held that the primary object of investigation in linguistics is the language, that linguistics is the science that investigates languages. *But this*

notion, that the linguistic world is made up of languages, does not hold up to close examination. (Lamb, 2004 [1986], p. 394) (emphasis added)

Lamb goes on, adding, hot on the heels of the words just cited,

The basic problem in attempting to define the language as an objective scientific concept is that of how to distinguish one language from another. I won't go into the unsolvable problem of how to distinguish language from extralinguistic communication systems.

In a review of the book from which these quotes have been culled, I summed up Lamb's alternative thesis thus:

Lamb argues that "it is actually impossible to define languages as distinguishable objects". (p. 394). Every known criterion that has been invoked to distinguish one language (to wit, appeal to a speech community, mutual intelligibility, possession of distinct grammars etc.) from another fails, not because their proponents have failed to be sufficiently rigorous but because, far from being a discrete entity (as most laypersons and some linguists suppose), language is seamless. So, instead of speaking of individual languages, says Lamb, we should be speaking of 'Language' with a capital 'L', given that there are no boundaries between supposedly distinct languages and "the whole planet is unified, as one human family speaking Language". Furthermore, "It [Language] is a composite of lexemes" and "In principle, lexemes have no regard for language boundaries" (p. 413). (Rajagopalan, 2007, p. 137)

I will be the first one to grant that this is an earthshakingly novel and daringly original approach to contemplating language. What it all ultimately boils down to is the question of not losing sight of the Big Picture in our eagerness to zero in on the specific issue we have chosen to focus our attention on. We have somehow convinced ourselves that the only way to do genuine science is by riveting our attention on the particular problem we have identified and then pan sideways or up and down to get at the attendant circumstances and 'ancillary issues' at stake. What if we reversed this directionality in our research practice and started off the other way around? No doubt, this may be full of unknowns, forcing us onto uncharted territories. But in light of the arguments presented above, it seems to me that it is worth a try! At the very least it will help break the logjam we are currently caught up in.

A LAST-MINUTE ADDENDUM (OR, IF YOU LIKE, A CODA!)

A major thrust of this paper has been to foreground the idea that it is never too late to backtrack in our researches and revisit our own arguably shaky decisions made early on that only resulted in setting up concepts and categories of dubious standing, no matter how strong their "obviousness" might have seemed at first glimpse, thanks, as I believe, to the sheer force of custom and unthinking adherence to beliefs handed down through generations. Among these concepts is the notion that there are such things as individual languages with their discrete identities guaranteed and defined once and for all, ready for linguists to dissect to their hearts' content and to base their highfalutin' theories on. As García & Li Wei (2014, p. 42) have forcefully argued, state-endorsed named languages are just that – product of wishful thinking on the part of politicians and nation-builders. They do indeed look good on paper but they have no analogues in the world of lived reality.

But then it is equally true that these early conceptual slipups (such as dreaming up the existence of discrete languages with their well-defined, durable identities) often permeate our metalanguage to such an extent that it becomes next to impossible to do

without resorting to them every once in a while (the force of custom, once again!). In such cases our (often inadvertent) use of the very idea we plead to see the back of must be seen as short for something like “what would traditionally or customarily be referred to as.” This is because radical changes in our thinking about language can only be brought about by starting with nibbling around the edges. After all, we cannot undertake a complete overhaul of the ship once it is afloat, out in the sea!

The very term ‘translanguaging,’ someone might argue, carries vestiges of the idea of language in precisely the sense its proponents seem eager to reject or at least call into question. Thus, a Wikipedia entry on translanguaging has the following to say by way of charting the history of the neologism (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Translanguaging>):

In the late 1970s and 80s second language education shifted to focus on the importance of communication and language use for participation in particular discourse communities. However, emphasizing language learning as a means to enter a discourse community was also problematic, as it pressured students to surrender their own language practices in order to become practicing members of the new discourse communities.

Translanguaging as a focus of study first emerged in Bangor, Wales, in the 1980s. It is based on François Grosjean's idea that bilinguals are not two monolinguals in one. Cen Williams and his colleagues were researching strategies of using both Welsh and English in a single lesson in a classroom setting. Cen Williams' Welsh term "*trawsieithu*" was translated into English as "translanguaging" by their colleague Colin Baker.

Scholars argue that translanguaging functions as an emancipation from the adverse second language acquisition pedagogies of the 20th century. They believe that translanguaging gives multilingual students an advantage within educational systems because it (1) promotes a more thorough understanding of content; (2) helps the development of the weaker language for bilingual or multilingual speakers; (3) fosters home-to-school links within language use; and (4) integrates fluent speakers with early learners, thus expediting the language learning process.

The passage above rightly points out that recent interest in translanguaging may be laid at the door of the surge in interest in second language teaching, but in my view errs in implicitly maintaining the idea of a language (in the singular) as a ‘self-sufficient whole,’ as it were, capable of existing in splendid isolation from all extraneous factors around it. This is evidenced in such snippets as “their own language practices,” “enter a new discourse community,” “both Welsh and English in a single lesson in a classroom setting” etc. As we noted earlier, this may be even inevitable to the extent that, as we noted earlier, our very metalanguage is compromised in some sense and unable to get rid of old and well-established meanings.

A more enlightening way of tracing the etymology of ‘translanguaging’ might be to see it as an outgrowth of Maturana’s revolutionary idea of ‘languaging,’ referred to earlier on in this paper. Far from regarding language as a given, languaging points to its true nature as something constantly in the making — its de-verbal genesis unmistakably announced in the use of the gerund. This goes against the practice among many scholars in the northern hemisphere where the tendency has been to lay a claim to its alleged European origins instead. The following excerpt from another Wikipedia entry bears witness to this trend:

The term "translanguaging" was coined in the 1980s by Cen Williams (applied in Welsh as *trawsieithu*) in his unpublished thesis titled “An Evaluation of Teaching and Learning Methods in the Context of Bilingual Secondary Education. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Translanguaging>)

Or, as García and Li Wei (2018) put it in a more thorough manner (though with some major differences in the timeline),

Coined in Welsh as *trawsiethu*, and translated into English by Baker (2001), the term “translanguaging” was first used by Cen Williams (1994) to describe pedagogical strategies in bilingual classrooms that did not strictly separate the use of two languages in instruction. Gradually the term also became used to describe the language use of students in bilingual and multilingual classrooms [...] and, by extension, the language practices of bilinguals/multilinguals in general. As more scholars started studying bilingualism and multilingualism through a translanguaging lens, its theoretical propositions have been expanded. Today, translanguaging refers to the use of language as a dynamic repertoire and not as a system with socially and politically defined boundaries.

Lest my point be misunderstood as to its true intent, let me make it clear that I am by no means disputing the claim that the neologism ‘translanguaging’ itself may have had its maiden appearance first attested in the writings of the scholars whose names are referred to in the passage cited above. But I do want to insist that its *élan vital* (to use the Bergsonian term, though not all of its philosophical implications), as captured by the use of the term by its present-day advocates like Ofelia García and Li Wei is more in the nature of a nod towards Maturana’s revolutionary thesis concerning language and its workings (although the two authors just mentioned show no signs of appreciating the fact, preferring instead to toe the ‘official line’).

Maturana’s view of ‘languaging’ is a far cry from the notion of language that linguists have embraced since time immemorial which they have, seldom, if ever, shown themselves seriously willing to subject to a critical examination – with notable exceptions like the aforementioned Sydney Lamb. Building on the idea signalled in the short quote from Maturana and Poerksen (2011), used in the epigraph to this paper, it seems reasonable to conclude that the construct called ‘language’ has, as the “background in which [it] makes sense”, the very field of study that we call linguistics.

One final, parting thought: if we take seriously Lamb’s notion of Language (with a capital ‘L’) along with Maturana’s notion of ‘languaging’ we may end up seeing the point of Makoni and Pennycook (2007)’s argument about the utter dispensability of the prefix ‘trans-’ – as the claim by Vogel and García (2017) that “the selection of features [by a translanguaging speaker] is guided not by grammar, but by the social information that each speaker has regarding the particular communicative context in which the social interaction takes place” could be seen as holding equally well. It makes no difference whatsoever whether one is talking about translanguaging or languaging simpliciter. Other arguments similar to Vogel and García’s have been mustered by Li Wei (2018: 9) to prop up the claim that the term ‘translanguaging’ is still worth retaining, though one would be justified to some extent in wondering whether this insistence hinges on anything substantive or would ultimately boil down to inconsequential terminological hairsplitting (The jury, though, is still out!).

To round off the central argument of this paper, then: the concept of ‘language contact’ is one that rests on assumptions such as that there have always existed individual languages with their identities intact – assumptions that have withstood the passage of time but, as we have seen, crumble under serious interrogation. The phenomenon of ‘translanguaging,’ or, for that matter, ‘languaging’ (with no prefix), is one that, when properly understood, will drive the final nail in its coffin.

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